

What if there is no them there is only us

Author: Fiona Robertson . July 2020

Take any group of people, even those who have never met each other before, and split them into two teams. Give them some kind of symbol, perhaps call one the yellow team and the other purple. Within about 10 minutes, sometime less, they don't just like and trust those in their own team more, they also like and trust those in the other team less. Just because they've been told they're in a team. Why?

You may have heard that recent research has proven Maslow's celebrated hierarchy of needs is actually wrong. Interestingly, the most basic need of human beings is not food, water and shelter. It is, in fact, belonging. This is because being part of a group is historically a pre-condition for access to food, water and shelter. Millions of years of evolution have hard-wired our brains to strive for belonging above all things.

And because humans are so hard-wired for belonging, we look for any way to identify that we are a welcome and accepted member of a group. That might explain why we like people in our own group more, but why do we like people in other groups less? And what is the implication of all this for organisational culture?

Because humans are so hard-wired for belonging, we look for any way to identify that we are a welcome and accepted member of a group.

Henri Tajfel was a Professor of Social Psychology at Oxford University until his death in 1982. Of Polish descent, he was a student at the Sorbonne in Paris when Germany invaded Poland. Because he spoke fluent French, he served in the French army until he was captured by the Germans and spent the rest of the war as a prisoner. He survived by hiding his Polish background and knew that, had he revealed it, his life would have been forfeit. He went on to create social identity theory.

This theory states that social identity is a cognitive process: the extent to which people perceive themselves to be a member of a particular social group, and others not to be, determines their reaction to 'others'. Numerous studies of the way individuals allocate rewards shows that merely being identified as being in the same group as another person will bias them towards members of their own group and against members of other groups. This means intergroup conflict is often purely a result of social categorisation. Hence the yellow and purple team reactions.

Organisations have their own version of 'social categorisation'. Reporting line is one of them. At the top of every organisation is a CEO-style role and a set of their direct reports. Every other member of the organisation ultimately reports through to one of those people and that is their first level of organisational identity. Their division becomes their organisational 'nationality', if you like. Social identity theory states that we will like members of our own division, our own tribe, more and we will like members of other divisions, other tribes, less. You will no doubt have observed this for yourself.

If you've worked in large corporates like I have, you will have seen what happens when two people who work for the same company meet for the first time. Invariably the conversation quickly turns to the organisational equivalent of: "so ... where're you from?". We crave knowing whether or not the other person is from our tribe. And if they're not from our divisional tribe and we're keen to connect with them on more than a superficial level, we'll often try and find some other kind of tribe that we both belong to. It might be our educational or functional background - "I've got a marketing background too" - or a similar family situation - "I've got young kids too" - or even the support of the same sports team. Anything to show we're in the same group; on the same side. Another form of social categorisation.

When we're with only other members of our own organisational tribe, we often find ourselves speaking about the other tribes differently. We are 'us'; they are 'them'. We will always give 'us' the benefit of the doubt. We will often accuse 'them' of being less dedicated, careful, intelligent or capable than 'us'. "If only those guys in marketing really understood sales." "If only those guys in sales really understood risk." There's something about perceiving other tribes as 'less than' that makes us feel like our own tribe is 'more than'.

Silos are not accidents in organisations, nor is it an accident that our endless attempts to break them down are often futile. Humans are hard-wired this way. Once we understand that, we can use it. We can give them new tribes to belong to that cut across the organisational silos.

“I shall define a group as a category of people fulfilling two criteria: the first, that an individual identifies himself as belonging to the category; and the second, that this identification is to him of some emotional significance” - Henri Tajfel

So the new cross-divisional tribes we give our people to belong to must allow them to identify themselves as belonging to those groups - something that's easy to achieve - and their identification must have some emotional meaning for them - not so easy. Given that humans crave belonging above all else, a relational reward is likely to be the most impactful. Think about whether the members of the cross-divisional tribe get to hang out with the CEO or other senior leaders in a meaningful way.

The reality is that organisational tribe is just a construct. But our evolution makes it an enormously powerful one. There is, of course, no 'them' at all. We can all be 'us' if we organise ourselves differently.



Fiona Robertson is the former Head of Culture for the National Australia Bank and a sought-after culture change and leadership speaker, facilitator, coach and author who helps leaders create cultures people really want to belong to.

Her first book, 'Rules of Belonging - change your organisational culture, delight your people and turbo-charge your results', is published by Major Street Publishing. More articles are available on www.fionarobertson.com

<https://thehumancapitalhub.com/articles/What-If-There-Is-No-Them-There-Is-Only-Us>